

Desi Dilemmas

by Sumun L. Pendakur

The Indian head bob. The fluidity of our head waggle is a source of comedy, mystery, and confusion to many Americans. Does it mean yes? No? Maybe? All of the above? Well, yes, all of those – and with a downward tilt of the mouth, can also mean “I don’t know.” People should praise us for the economy of movement, really! It’s an all-in-one technique that surpasses the more time consuming definitive yes and no of the decisive American head. But it’s one of those things that I have observed creating a perplexed expression on the faces of those unfamiliar with it. I work on a college campus (the University of Southern California, to be precise). USC has the largest number of international students in the country, a high percentage of whom happen to be from India. Sometimes I wonder if there’s a high-speed train directly (or a Hogwarts Express) connecting the IITs of India to our campus...but I digress. In addition to a large number of international Indian students, we also have a fair number of Indian American students. Imagine the combined, compounded effect of so many heads bobbing on one campus! Picture the sheer bewilderment on the collective consciousness of so many American students, desperately trying to understand their TAs. Of course, I’m joking. But I love the picture in my head!

Less funny to me are the kinds of questions that so many Asian Americans, Indians and Indian Americans included, field all the time. I was born and raised in the United States, and I can’t count how many times I (or my friends) have gotten these questions. You know the ones I’m talking about:

Q1. “So...where are you from?”

Q2. “So...what are you?”

Q3. “Wow! You speak English really well!”

Now, I believe intent matters. If someone has asked me or a desi friend the question innocently, I gently offer a nuanced response to their questions. Something along the lines of, “Well, I was born in Seattle and raised in Chicago. But my parents are from Karnataka, which is in south India. Is that what you wanted to know?” If I smell something stinkier, however, like willful ignorance, I launch into a lecture about treating us like “forever foreigners,” acting on racist and ahistorical assumptions, lacking any basic understanding of American immigration history – you get the idea. But sometimes, I just want to mess with people. Come on, admit it, you’ve wanted to do the same! So I’ve come up with some funny answers over the years. In response to the three questions above, here’s what I shoot back:

Q1. “Well, I was born in Seattle. Raised in Evanston, Illinois. Right outside of Chicago. Then, I lived in New York City. After that, I was in Ann Arbor, Michigan. And now, we’re standing here together in Los Angeles.” By that point, I’ve usually scared off the questioner by sharing my entire life history with them.

Q2. This is a fun one! My response has evolved in the last decade. 10 years ago: “Indian. Oh, let me be clear! Dot, not feather.” Now: “Indian. Oh, let me be clear! Call center, not casino.” Both responses freak out the questioner, causing them to flee the scene quickly.

Q3. Here are two quick ways to respond – and both get the job done!

Option 1: “Wow, thanks! My English is a product of the hundreds of years of tyrannical colonial rule of India by the British!”

Option 2: “Well, that should be the case, since I majored in English.” (Which, by the way, is a complete lie. I double majored in History and Women’s Studies. But stretching the truth a little to stick someone’s foot in their own mouth is permissible, I say.)

Both of these responses quickly call forth stammered apologies. Mission accomplished.

Now, the point is that our interactions with other Americans, as Indians and Indian Americans, immigrants and children of immigrants, are continually navigated through complicated histories of race, power, class, and community formation. Sometimes those cross-cultural interactions are a source of genuine laughter and learning. Sometimes, they expose deep-seated ignorance and cultural myopia and act as microaggressions that affect our psyches. As an educator, however, I’m immensely grateful to work in an environment where people are striving to know about one another and the world around them. It’s not perfect, but that passion for educational engagement and understanding drives me (regardless of the sarcasm I’ve expressed above!). On our collective journey to intercultural peace, I will leave you with one final piece of advice. Don’t freak out when your Indian TA asks you for a rubber. I promise, he’s not trying to fool around with you! Just give him a gentle head bob, smile, and hand him an eraser.

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